# MIRACLES: FACTS OR FANTASIES?

By Jeffrey Keefe, O. F. M. Conv.

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*by*

*Jeffrey Keefe, O.F.M. Conv.*

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# *MIRACLES:*

# *FACTS OR FANTASIES?*

## The First Skeptic

"Lourdes. . . . *A tremendous hoax born of a teen-aged peasant girl's hallucination. Nourished for some forty years with a few cures resulting from hysteria and auto-suggestion. The folly of the uneducated!*"

Such were the musings of the famous visitor to the site of the Immaculate Virgin's appearance to Bernadette Soubirous. Earlier the visitor had quipped to one of the doctors that he would be satisfied if "only so much as a cut finger came up whole from the baths." The doctor replied by showing the skeptic one of his cases, a young lady named Marie Lemarchand. One look was sufficient to bring agreement with the doctor's opinion: "If she were cured, it would indeed be a miracle."

The pitiable girl was afflicted with lupus, a tubercular disease which affects the skin and leaves deep ulcers. Her face was grotesque, as though ravaged by leprosy. The

skeptical visitor, a man of great talent with his pen, afterwards described her plight. "The face was elongated like a dog's nose; it looked repulsive, with bristling hair and big round eyes. The cartilage of the nose was almost consumed, the extremely swollen upper lip pulled the mouth up to one side like a crooked cleft, loathsome and shapeless. Blood and matter oozed out of the big sallow ulcer...." Moreover, the disease had penetrated to inner organs. Both lungs were damaged seriously.

A cut finger healed in the baths was certainly a slight demand. Almost four decades before, when Bernadette first reported the apparitions, the cautious pastor, Abbé Peyramale, had demanded a sign. Bernadette's "Lady" should make his rosebush bloom in midwinter. The Abbé's rosebush did not bloom until the usual season. Instead, heaven gave the miraculous spring of Massabielle. The demand of the unbelieving visitor was met in much the same way. Heaven granted more than was asked.

The doctor to whom the visitor had scoffed about the cut finger broke the news. Marie Lemarchand was well! After she had bathed in the waters of Massabielle the

disease was cured. The ulcer had disappeared in a moment. "Come and look at her carefully," the doctor pleaded. "Here is what you are seeking, Monsieur Zola."

Emile Zola, the renowned French rationalist and novelist, rejected his own bid for faith. He stubbornly refused to look at the girl. The man who had sought only a healed cut now gave the doctor his final, somewhat panicky verdict: "Even if all the sick in Lourdes were cured in one moment, I could not believe."

## The Second Skeptic

A decade later Lourdes had a similar visitor. One question absorbed the young medical professor. "What is the secret of Lourdes, cures?" The word *miracle* explained nothing; it was simply a synonym for *cause unknown*. Now, in May of 1903, he found himself at the famous grotto, a last-minute substitute for another physician.

He was glad for this opportunity. During the train trip to this village in southern France, he had begun a much-thought-of project. He would be the first to make a systematic study of some of the cases and perhaps of some of the cures. He might

stumble on their cause, or prove them imaginary. Either result would be a genuine contribution to science.

One case was conspicuous, even amid the universal suffering of the hospital train. The investigating professor and two fellow doctors diagnosed Marie Ferrand's illness as advanced tuberculous peritonitis. The young physician precisely recorded each detail. The suffering girl's abdomen was distended, apparently by solid masses. Her legs were swollen. Her temperature was high, heartbeat and breathing accelerated. It was a classic, textbook-perfect case.

The trip was torturous for Marie Ferrand. The medical attendants on the train feared that it would kill her. But Marie Ferrand clung to life until her arrival at the shrine. There she grew worse. The three doctors warned that Marie Ferrand was dying.

Fearfully the porters brought her to the baths fed by the spring which had first bubbled forth in 1858. But her condition was so desperate that they dared not immerse her. They merely poured some water on her abdomen. As she was carried out the young investigating physician checked her condi-

tion; he noted no change. The stretcher bearers headed for the grotto.

The observant doctor was again at Marie Ferrand's side an hour later. Methodically he made another routine check. Suddenly he turned pale. As he stared in wonderment, the part of the blanket which covered his patient's abdomen gradually flattened. Marie Ferrand's heartbeat became regular. "I am still weak," she said, "but I feel I am cured." The physician decided to leave the patient to the other doctors before he lost his composure.

In four hours he returned to her at the hospital. Again he was shocked by further improvement. Her pulse, respiration and heartbeat were normal. The hard masses in her abdomen were gone. The doctors who had concurred in the original diagnosis agreed once more. "This girl is well. Your patient has been cured, Doctor Carrel!"

Alexis Carrel did make contributions to science as he had dreamed of doing. He won world fame by developing new techniques in surgery, and he pioneered in the transplanting of organs. But his discovery at Lourdes was principally a contribution to himself. Carrel rediscovered the faith which

fashionable, turn-of-the-century agnosticism had robbed him of. In Marie Ferrand's cure he recognized not only God's power but also His loving providence. For the miracle had cured the patient he had studied most closely and had considered most hopeless. Alexis Carrel lived and died a staunch Catholic.

## One Requisite

People often say: "I would accept miracles if I saw one." Such an experience, however, is necessarily rare by the fact that miracles are rare. Moreover, seeing is not always believing. Zola's case proves that. He and Carrel had similar educational backgrounds and underwent a similar experience. Both had keen minds. Their cases differed in one important factor. Carrel manifested a good will. Even if Zola had an open mind, it would not have ensured belief. As Samuel Butler in "Hudibras" put it:

*He that complies against his will,*
*Is of his own opinion still.*

The case for miracles is open for anyone to investigate. Such an investigation will prove profitable for every type of mind. Skeptics will see the reasonableness of belief.

Those on the other extreme, the gullible, will be moved to temper their credulity and be less apt to say *miracle* for *marvel*. Believers will be enabled to follow St. Peter's exhortation to give reasons for the faith that is in them.

Because the Church condemns rationalism, it does not follow that she condemns reason. Rationalism holds that comprehension is a necessary condition of knowledge; its criterion for accepting a truth is understanding it through human reason. This philosophy is the offspring of pride, not of reason. For the rationalist refuses to admit that there is any truth beyond his powers of comprehension. Yet in daily life men accept many things as true, despite their inability to understand them. Because the rationalist cannot understand the miracle, he decrees that it is impossible. In such a case, even the fact of the miracle does not prove its possibility.

True, there are times when a Catholic must say, "I believe, but I do not comprehend." But when such is the case he is urged to study his belief and discover its harmony with the principles of reason. The very least the Catholic can always demon-

strate is the lack of a contradiction of reason in his creed.

The first task in any discussion is to define terms. Just what does the Church mean by *miracle*. A theologian would say that "a miracle is an effect produced by God beyond the natural course of events." St. Thomas Aquinas writes that "those things are really to be called miracles which are performed by God beyond the order usually observed in things" ("Contra Gentiles," l.3., cp. 101).

"Performed by God." First of all, only good effects proceed from God. A prodigy worked for a bad purpose hardly would come from the hand of God. Furthermore, all possible natural explanations must be ruled out in the case of a miracle. A report that someone walked on water would arouse general interest. Nevertheless, such a feat is no miracle when the water is frozen solid.

## Three Grades

For an event to be miraculous it must surpass the usual systematic workings of *all* created nature. This transcendence of nature can occur in three ways — in substance, in subject, or in manner.

The highest degree of miracle is a work performed by God that no power of nature can do. The Fourth Book of Kings (20:8 ff.) records such a miracle by the prophet Isaias. As a sign of His pledge of longer life for King Ezechias, God caused the sun to move back a distance with measured ten degrees on the king's sundial. A twentieth-century example is the solar phenomenon at Fatima in 1917, when a crowd of 70,000 witnessed the sun dancing in the sky.

The second degree of miracle is exemplified when God does something that nature ordinarily does, but not in the subject at hand. For instance, nature can produce life, but not in a corpse, as happened when Christ raised Lazarus from the tomb. Natural processes can produce wine, but not from water as Jesus did at the wedding reception in Cana.

The most common type, if a miracle can ever be called common, is the third degree — a miracle of manner. Nature can heal a broken bone, but not in an instant, as St. Anthony is said to have done when he rejoined a peasant's severed foot to his leg. Sulpha drugs might have cured the fever of St. Peter's mother-in-law, but her cure ranks

as miraculous because in it Jesus dispensed with natural means.

## Four Objections Overruled

A line-up of the objectors to miracles reveals a number of men whom Book Clubs loosely laud as "great thinkers." Prominent names in the history of modern thought appear on the roster. There is Rousseau, who says that we never can know enough really to be sure that an event is miraculous. And Hume, who claims that miracles violate laws of nature. And Voltaire, who worries over the problem that miracles show God is not altogether wise or changeless.

Rousseau's argument against miracles is the most common and popular today. He pointed out that we never can be certain that an event is beyond the powers of nature. The reason is obvious. We do not know all the powers of nature.

Even today, two hundred years later, we must admit to Monsieur Rousseau that we have not discovered all that nature can do. However, we do know some things that nature *cannot* do. Nature cannot produce something from nothing, nor give life back to the dead, nor cure advanced organic ill-

ness in an instant. If these things happen, they are beyond nature and indicate a power greater than that of nature.

Hume, the Scotsman, and Spinoza, the Dutch philosopher, both insisted that miracles are impossible because they violate laws of nature. These gentlemen might have scored a point if this were really the case. It would not reflect wisdom on God's part if He were to make laws of nature and then break them. But miracles do not violate laws of nature in the sense of breaking them.

After all, what is a law of nature but the observed manner in which certain forces of nature consistently act? These forces have properties which are tied up with the very nature of the thing involved, as heat is a characteristic of fire. Given the same circumstances, these characteristics always will operate in the same way. Water boils at 212° Farenheit as long as the pressure is standard; it seeks its own level as long as it is liquid.

The answer to the problem of Hume and company is this. A miracle does not repeal a law of nature. It merely suspends its application. For a miracle does not change the nature or characteristics of the subject in question. When we say, "Fire burns," we

mean that fire is determined by its natural make-up to a particular effect; namely, fire has a characteristic tendency to decompose combustible material rapidly. However, the exercise of this tendency depends on circumstances which sometimes can be controlled, as happens when a house is fireproofed. The fireproofing is an interposed factor which does not change the nature of fire, but prevents fire from acting according to its nature. So too, when the three young men were thrown into Nabuchodonosor's furnace, the law "Fire burns," still held true, as the ruler's servants who went too near the mounting flames tragically discovered.

A miracle is nothing else but an action of God which "overrules" a law of nature. When a boy throws a ball into the air or attracts iron filings with his toy magnet, he actually is "overruling" the law of gravity. Here is a case where a law of nature is restrained from producing its usual effect by the intervention of a higher agency in nature. Such intervention does not disrupt the stability of nature, nor impair the law of gravity. Therefore, there should be no repugnance in believing that the Highest Agent in nature can act in a similar manner.

Certainly the Creator's power is greater than the power of His creation. As Dom Chapman pointedly observed: "The 'impossibility of miracles' is another way of saying that everyone can act in the world except the Creator."

There are also Voltaire's arguments. He maintained that a miracle would entail a flaw in God. Theologians teach that God is changeless. Yet a miracle indicates that God changed His mind in a particular case by suspending one of the laws He made. In addition, miracles indicate that God is not all-wise. For if miracles are needed, there must be defects in God's established natural order which require correction.

Thomas Aquinas offered a solution five centuries before Voltaire began to attack the Church. In fact, some biographers suspect that Voltaire used St. Thomas as a source for subtle arguments. The Dominican saint has the open-minded habit of reviewing the objections against each point of Catholic teaching before treating it.

Had he so desired, Voltaire could have read further and discovered that St. Thomas demolishes the difficulty concerning God's seeming change of mind. To paraphrase

the scholarly friar, it is one thing to change a plan, another to plan a change. God foresaw from all eternity that at a particular moment in time man would receive a special mark of His power.

The second objection is answered ably by Cardinal Newman. He observes that a miracle is more than an isolated exception to the physical order. As such it would deform a harmonious system. Rather, miracles are a system themselves, a moral plan, prompted by the wisest motives. Miracles are benevolent reminders of the existence of God and of man's dependence on Him. They show forth God's power, and His interest in the creature made to His likeness. For each succeeding generation they underline God's signature on His revelation.

St. Augustine develops the theme that the value of a miracle is not its wonder but its rarity. The ordinary government of the universe mirrors far greater power and providence than the feeding of a thousand men per loaf of bread. Nature constantly speaks of God, but men grow accustomed and inattentive to its voice. To rouse men from this lethargy, a loving God performs an

occasional miracle by which nature shouts of God's interest in them.

## Double Query

Two questions must be answered when examining what may be miraculous. First, did the extraordinary event take place? Second, was it beyond all natural causes? The powers of reason alone are sufficient for anyone to answer these questions. No dependence on faith is necessary.

Miracles, as historical facts, are known as any other historical fact — by the testimony of witnesses. When an event is reported as miraculous, minute testimony is obtained from all available witnesses. Catholics offer the same type of proof for miraculous events as the history professor offers for the trials of Valley Forge. In many cases, especially for more recent miracles, the Church has better checked evidence than that which supports a great deal of accepted history.

Miracles, as miracles, are known by elimination of all other possible explanations. No one has a better claim to the title "healthy skeptic" than the Church. She realizes that many times the faithful cry "Miracle!" where there is none, and thereby cause

ridicule of religion. In any specialized field at least two experts are called in to investigate. If these two disagree, other specialists are consulted and engaged to study the case.

Review once the procedure for judging cures proposed as miraculous. Only organic diseases are considered as subjects of a possible miraculous cure. Functional disorders are never taken into account.

An organic disease is one which results from damaged tissue or defects in the structure of an organ. A disorder is classed as functional if the organ is sound, but does not operate properly. Such disorders often are due to a nervous or emotional derangement. They can be caused by hysteria and cured by hysteria.

A sickness like tuberculosis is not cured instantly by auto-suggestion. Nor does decayed bone tissue suddenly become healthy by hysteria. Yet there are cases, like those of Marie Lemarchand and Marie Ferrand, where diseased tissues have been suddenly renewed or missing tissues unexplainably restored. These cases are documented by non-Catholic physicians and scientists, no less than by Catholic.

In an investigation which precedes the declaration of the Church that a person is in heaven, any alleged miraculous cure must be measured by the stringent conditions laid down by Pope Benedict XIV. The illness must be grave, impossible or at least difficult to cure; it must not have arrived at such a stage that recovery would follow regardless; medicine must be unavailing if it is employed; the cure should be sudden, perfect, accompanied by no crisis; and the sickness must not return. Ecclesiastical authorities never pass judgment before a minimum wait of one year, to ensure a permanent result.

When it comes to investigating miracles the Church rivals the F. B. I. in scientific efficiency. At Lourdes, for example, each patient is examined by several doctors before and after entering the baths. Recently an invitation was issued to an additional one thousand doctors to investigate Lourdes. The doctors and their aides who are now there, are of any and no faith. It is only after a long study that a final decision is given on any case. Any informed person who persists in accusing the Church of spreading "old

wives' tales" deserves no other label than that of bigot.

## Finale

The many points of debate over miracles can be digested to two considerations, one philosophical, the other historical. First, can God perform works which surpass the powers of created nature? And secondly, has He ever done so?

The first consideration is more important from the standpoint of convincing people. For the notion of miracles usually is rejected on the basis of a preconceived philosophical bias: Miracles do not happen because they cannot. Actually, the second consideration can provide a short cut by including the first. Miracles can happen because they do.

This treatment has shown that there is no contradiction in the concept of miracles. They do not oppose the power, providence or wisdom of God. Nor do they play havoc with the laws of nature. And although beyond the power of men to comprehend, they are not beyond the power of men to know.

The fact of miracles is established by the reports of tested witnesses. This, after all,

is the main source of all our knowledge. We witness extremely little of what we know. Even documents rest ultimately on witnessed accounts. To this ordinary source of knowledge, the Church adds the scrutiny of skilled technicians.

The final "punch line" is this. Miracles, since they are divine in cause, are the seal of God. God would not certify a false religion. The divine seal is stamped firmly on the Catholic Church through Lourdes, through Fatima, and through the many documented miracles attesting the intercession of those whom the Church has declared saints of God.

*This alone truth sometimes craves, that it be not condemned unheard.*
— Tertullian

When you have finished reading this pamphlet, pass it on to an associate, or leave it in a public place.

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